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Observance of the Sabbath

1888

Tabitha DeHart (2105)

It is clear from Martha's journals that her faith was a large part of her life. This is perhaps most clear in how she documents the Sabbath each week in her journal. Starting in or before 1868, Martha recorded the text of the sermon each week, often with a few of her own brief reflections on the text. Martha also documents the weekly routines that she and her children kept on the Sabbath—sermon, Sabbath school, Young folks prayer meeting, and catechism reciting. Martha seems to have been a (though not necessarily *the*) spiritual leader in her home, and the way that Martha led her family in observing the Sabbath highlights how much Martha prized her own faith and how committed she was to cultivating that same faith in her family.

During Martha's lifetime, a mother was expected to play a large role in cultivating her children's moral natures: "The greatest responsibility that the middle-class matron had was to her home life—to be, in fact, 'the angel of the house'" (Graham 156). According to another source, "interest in domestic piety increased between 1830 and 1870 [as] the traditional Calvinist notion of sin and salvation [was overturned] by advancing the spiritual dimensions of the home' (qtd in Graham 156).

Of course, the Sabbath was an important part of cultivating home religion. In her *House and Home Papers*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, speaking through the voice of her pseudonym "Christopher Crowfield," states, "I should define the Sabbath as a divine and fatherly gift to man,—a day expressly set apart for the cultivation of his moral nature" (14). Stowe goes on to say that "accordingly, whatever ways and practices interfere with the purpose of the Sabbath as a

day of worship and moral culture should be avoided; and all family arrangements for the day should be made with reference thereto” (322).

Martha finished reading Stowe’s *House and Home Papers* on June 5, 1867, so Stowe’s views of home religion likely influenced Martha’s understanding of the purpose of and appropriate practice for the Sabbath. Martha certainly structured her Sabbath day around “cultivating her moral nature” and encouraged her children to do the same. A typical Sabbath for Martha included attending church in the morning with her husband James and listening to a sermon or two, visiting with friends or at times tending to the sick, and reviewing catechism with the younger children in the evening. Her teenagers—Fred 18, Harlan, 16 and Homer, 14, and Clayton, 8 attended Sabbath school as well as the “Young folks prayer meeting” which apparently started at 5:30. On 20 May, 1888, Martha writes, “Harlan and Homer went to the Sabbath School as usual and came back home” and on 13 May she writes, “At half past five Fred and Harlan attended the young folks prayer meeting.” At some point, Martha also became a Sabbath school teacher herself, a role she took very seriously.

Martha, too, led her younger children—the ones who couldn’t go the “Young Folks prayer meeting”—in Bible reading and catechism reciting. According to Graham, “the catechism [was] a series of questions and answers based on the Bible and ratified by the Southern Presbyterian Church” (156). Some of the questions in the catechism covered the topics of “sin and salvation, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer” (156). Nearly every Sabbath, Martha mentions the “questions, Psalms, and Bible reading” in her report of the day. On 17 June she writes, “We had our catechism (?) and Bible reading as usual,” showing that this Sunday-evening routine was just that—routine.

As with any family—especially one in Victorian America—the activities that children take part in are largely dependent on what their parents allow and promote. The fact that these Sabbath activities were such an integral, routine part of Sunday for her children suggests that Martha cultivated her children’s “moral natures” through encouraging these activities. Based on her respect for Dr. Morton, it makes sense that she would have integrated his teaching on the topic, as well. On Sunday, 23 September, 1894, she records the following:

“The subject of the text is the model home—or religion in the family. [...] To act wisely in the home we must have parental government as government in the home. There must be a mingling of parental authority with parental love. We are not acting wisely if we leave our children to decide whether they go to church or not—or whether they ramble about on the street or not.”

Stowe also promoted faithful church attendance: “As members of the community, we should go to church, and do all in our power to support the outward ordinances of religion. If a conscientious man makes up his mind that Sunday is a day for outward acts of worship and reverence, he should do his own part as an individual towards sustaining these observances” (327-328). It was rare that Martha skipped church, and when she had to for health or some other reason, she was greatly disappointed. On Christmas day of 1898, Martha writes, “I was at home to day. A matter of necessity I never like to be away from church- especially the last Sabbath of the year or the first Sabbath.” And yet, she writes that someone (Clara, perhaps) brought the text of the sermon home for her, which she duly notes in her journal, even though she was not there to hear the message.

Stowe focuses on the heart of the law rather than the letter of the law in her recommendations on how the Sabbath should be spent. She argues that there should be flexibility

in the way one chooses to keep the Sabbath; for example, it matters less what kind of music that one listens to and more what “effects” that music has on the person who listens to it (327). Also for Stowe, part of retaining flexibility in one’s observance of the Sabbath was in “giv[ing] [...] latitude [...] to children” (324).

Martha showed flexibility in the way she observed the Sabbath by accommodating her children and by occasionally missing services to care for a needy friend. On 4 June, 1888, she writes, “This afternoon Clayton and Jason and I had our questions and Psalms and text out in the sunshine on the bridge over by the railroad. The Carpenter read the 13 and 14 chapters of Luke with us this Evening.” Marthas willingness to take advantage of the nice weather and let her children be outside for their catechism as well as her willingness to include a hired hand shows her flexibility.

There are also a few times that she missed listening to her beloved Pastor Morton in order to care for an ailing or struggling friend. On Sunday, 11 June, 1888, she writes, “Mr. Mc. and I called at Uncle David Torrences (?) before church, Aunt Nancy asked me to stay with them. Mr. Mc. called for me after preaching. [...] We had preaching at our own church. Mr. Morton preached I was so anxious to have been there--but did not want to leave Aunt Nancy.” Similarly, on Sunday, 8 July, 1888, she writes,

“Fred, Harlan, Clara and Jason at Sabbath School and church. Fannie, Homer, Clayton, and Florence at home. Mr. Mc. and I went off to Mr. Peters this morning--they seemed so sorrowful we could not find in our heart to leave them--we went with them to their church in Selma. Rev. Timmons (?) and Rev Johston (?), colored brothers [...] altogether we certainly felt that, under the circumstances, it was good for us to be there--

notwithstanding what their mistakes might be yet it was pleasing to see that they were resting all upon Jesus and were in earnest in trying to lead others to him.”

The way that Martha keeps the Sabbath, then, provides an important window into her heart: for her, personal holiness—as represented by attending her own church where she can trust she is receiving correct doctrine—as well as keeping a certain tradition (attending her own church) is less important to her than caring for the needy.

Martha’s heart to seek the Lord and to cultivate this attitude within her children is perhaps best distilled in the following speech she gave and then recorded in her journal on 9 July 1899:

“But we are to talk today more especially on the mother’s work. It is generally understood that a mother’s work must begin at home. Madam Willard said it was only as a mother did her full duty in her own home that she is capable of doing anything of great value elsewhere. A mother must first reform herself. She must first be right with God before she will be able to set her own home or family right.

But there are many sides to a mother’s work. I will speak a moment on the spiritual side and will begin by asking what is the most important thing to teach a child? The greatest thing a child can be taught in the world is to fear the Lord. To teach this well implies most everything else. It means to see God in everything. It means to teach the (seeing?) of sin. It means to teach a child who God is, what heaven is. It means to teach what hell is, how dreadful it is to be lost, to go down to the dark region of darkness. It means to teach a child from its very infancy who Jesus is, who loves the little children and said forbid them not to come unto me. This implies they are susceptible of love. Then his promise that they that seek me early shall find me. Let it be remembered to be successful we must

begin early. Teach a child to pray as soon as it can lisp its mother's name. Teach it to love and reverence the Bible. Teach them little texts. Teach them obedience."

Martha took her role as mother and spiritual shepherd seriously, both in her teaching of Sabbath school outside of the home and in her cultivation of religion within the home. This is perhaps clearest in how she chose to observe the Sabbath, and how she encouraged her family to do the same.

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